

Jack Robinson

by the same author

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Someone was running, hard, behind me. Had I paid for the coffee? My mind was a blank. It was the waiter, I decided, and I hadn't paid. I stopped and turned and he almost knocked me over. Grinning, out of breath, he handed me the book I'd left on the table. Had I read *XXX*, he asked, by the same author. No, I said, not that one, although in fact I have read it. He seemed a little *eager*. He was younger than me, in the way that she is older. You should, he said. It's one of the early ones but it's still her best.

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T. S. Nyman. She's a blue writer, I knew that from the opening paragraph of *XXX*, which was the first Nyman I came across. A girlfriend gave it me on her birthday – birthdays, for her, were for giving, not receiving. I didn't get round to reading it until a year after we'd split up, and it completely changed the way I thought about her. Not completely, but it put a different light on both of us. I read it in Berlin, in the afternoons, sitting in a park until it got too cold, and while I was reading it that book became, in a way, *her*, my ex-girlfriend, though it was an unlikely substitute: Nyman's whole sensibility is different, they wouldn't know what to say to each other if they met. They might look at each other's shoes. There are pink writers, obviously, and there are grey writers and brown writers and red writers, even some yellow ones, and most of them can shift around a little on the spectrum but each does have a *base* colour and Nyman is one of the blues but also a little coy, peeping from behind those initials.

F or someone who hasn't even started, where to begin? You know when you're asked to recommend something from a menu, and you don't even know whether the person asking is allergic to nuts? You could rearrange the titles in alpha-order and start with *A*. You could start with the title that's most suggestive, I mean that suggests more sexual content than the others. A lot of people might do that, but it's not a proven method. Titles are just handles, usernames, you make associative links and leaps but you can be way off beam. *XXX*, for example, despite what it says on the tin, has probably the least sex of all her books. I think her publisher chose that title, in desperation. You could start with the one that someone whose opinions you don't respect thinks is terrible, or the one someone you do respect says is good, but that's not a proven method either. For a first date, going for the one with the fewest number of pages might be best. Of course there's always the risk that you'll *like* it, which is a little scary, because then you'll want to read the others, and what you're basically doing here is signing away a percentage of the rest of your life to this writer. I don't know

what exact percentage because I don't know when you're going to die, and neither do you, but that's quite a commitment. Maybe get your mum or your dad to choose. Many arranged marriages do work.

The waiter has emailed me. I must have written my contact details on the flyleaf of the book I left on the café table and this was stupid: not just that, but even to worry about losing things. He had to rewind to the beginning: 'I'm the waiter who chased after you.' He's not really a waiter. The only real waiters are the ones aged around seventy; the others are actors or photographers. This one is a writer, or rather, he wants to *become* a writer, but meanwhile he has to feed himself and waiting is only one letter different from writing. His name is Eric. In his email he reminded me of the scene in *XXX* where the wife is masturbating and her husband is lying beside her in bed in their hotel room, reading, and the book he's reading is titled *XXX* – that's all we're given, the title, and at the time it didn't exist. At some point, Eric thinks, Nyman will get around to writing that book. Otherwise why even mention its title?